

# Reading and thinking about the avant-garde

by Chuck Kleinhans

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According to my dictionary,

“Avant-garde is the advance group in any field, esp. in the visual, literary, or musical arts, whose works are characterized chiefly by unorthodox and experimental methods.”

Fair enough. We might add, recalling that the term is originally a military one (the first unit to advance and engage the enemy), that the avant-garde is usually combative. Of course the artistic avant-garde is usually combative not towards the common enemy of all the arts (whatever that might be), but rather towards the bulk of artistic production. Being in advance, the concept of an avant-garde presumes something behind: qualitatively, quantitatively, and temporally. Thus the idea of the avant-garde tends to assume that the main body will someday catch up with where the avant-garde is today, and that by that time the vanguard will have moved on to a new position.

## READING ABOUT THE NORTH AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE

Living in Chicago last summer, I could read about the avant-garde a lot more easily than I could see avant-garde films. This says something: that few, people on this continent except in Manhattan, and perhaps the San Francisco Bay area, have access to avant-garde films (or, if you prefer: underground, experimental, personal, lyrical, or specificities like New American Cinema, or structural film, or names from Deren to Wieland).

Except for a few little pockets of aficionados who screen experimental films—often short lived groups—hardly anyone can really see such films, study them, appreciate them. While avant-garde filmmakers and

publicists periodically proclaim that these films are widely seen, they shouldn't fool anyone. Such ceremonial proclamations, like graduation day speeches, have no bearing on reality. In pragmatic terms, a Hitchcock or Borzage freak can see more films more often than a devotee of Kenneth Anger or Bruce Baillie.

And since so few can see avant-garde films, it is understandable (though surely not admirable) that critical put-downs by the uninformed carry a considerable weight. Interested in innovative films, I found myself caught up in the publicist/denigrator syndrome, alternately reading the ritualized murk of cultists and the snide stupidities of critics who have seen one (if that) Brakhage film and then feel qualified to generalize and dismiss (an action roughly equivalent to discussing Welles authoritatively after seeing only the first five minutes of *CITIZEN KANE*). In any case, living outside of Manhattan, I fell back on print, and began reading about the U.S. avant-garde.

### ONE: CRANKS AND CATALOGUES

“Do I contradict myself? very well,  
I contradict myself.”  
—Walt Whitman

The most prevalent type of film book on U.S. avant-garde films is the catalogue or anthology. Such collections have their usefulness (you'd feel embarrassed at not having them on your bookshelf if really into avant-garde film), especially for quick reference, but they tend to be indiscriminate. The frankest approach to this problem is Jonas Mekas, for he celebrates his self-perceived role as publicist:

“It is not my business to tell you what it's all about. My business is to get excited about it, to bring it to your attention. I am a raving maniac of the cinema.”

In *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971*, a collection of his *Village Voice* articles, he takes full advantage of being at the center of a growing film movement. He combines raves, anecdotes, polemics against this or that aspect of the establishment, and gossip. The book gains from having a chronological sequence, which allows a glimpse of history. (Taken alone, week by week, I've always found his columns of primary interest only if one is really into the latest New York thing. West of the Hudson, Mekas shares with the *Voice* its weekly Manhattan provincialism.) Since Mekas disarms one's reservations by celebrating his own limits, he leaves little to say, and also little to think about: good reading on public transportation.

Sheldon Renan's *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* has a slightly different approach with approximately the same end. Basically it catalogues the New American Cinema up to 1966, and it

provides an overview of what was happening. But Renan's attempts at criticism have all the tautological finesse of the Flower Children's proclamations:

“The new man is an explorer of ways of seeing and of existing. He is essentially responsible not to society but to himself. His goal is the fulfillment of his own individual vision, not the playing of a societal role. Ideally, the new man seem more, feels more, is willing to experience more than the ‘conventional man.’ He is the new species for a new age and he is prepared for a future that will witness unprecedented changes ... It is the world of the new man, almost a separate society of sympathetic individuals, that provides the primary audience for these films. For, with his commitment to freedom and individuality in a time of increasing imprisonment by standardization, the new man has necessarily been an underground man.”

This statement could stand for a thousand others uttered by the bulk of avant-gardists and their intellectual groupies. No awareness that the ideas are over 150 years old. No consciousness that Dostoyevsky said something about the “underground man.” No awareness that for those below the upper middle class, selfishness is hardly a viable way of life.

Gene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema* has the same advantages and disadvantages as the catalogue approach. Youngblood in some ways matches Renan's “gee whiz” enthusiasm while showing evidence of wider reading. In the footnotes J.R. Pierce, Norbert Weiner, and Ludwig Wittgenstein bump up against Buckminster Fuller, Krishnamurti, and Marshall McLuhan. Youngblood's critical amalgam finds its level at about that of Hermann Hesse, Alvin Toffler, and Norman O. Brown. However, Youngblood's analysis of video experiments, computer films, intermedia, and all the rest of the expansion of traditionally conceived cinema in the late 60s contains a good deal of hard thought, if you can get beyond the quaintly dated jargon of the period. Frankly, I have a hard time doing so, and I haven't finished the book, being stopped by laughter almost every time I pick it up with the first line of the author's biography: “Gene Youngblood became a passenger of *Spaceship Earth* on May 30, 1942.”

Also in the catalogue series is David Curtis's *Experimental Cinema*. Although Curtis seems to offer a history, he really gives a chronology which begins with the post-WW1 European avant-garde and which ends up with what I'd tentatively call post-New American Cinema. (There doesn't seem to be general agreement on terms yet. Some favor minimal film and structural film, but these refer to smaller groups within the avant-garde phenomenon.) While his information is useful, too often you sense Curtis hasn't seen the film, or when he has, that he hasn't the

ability to describe it. For example, he writes of Jack Smith's FLAMING CREATURES:

“The static camera allows the viewer to appreciate the Delacroix-like chance compositions that the creatures adopt.”

Did anyone ever think of Delacroix having chance compositions?

Two anthologies on avant-garde film have the problem and rewards of all anthologies. P. Adams Sitney's collection in the *Film Culture Reader* gives an overview of the theoretical organ of the New American Cinema, while Gregory Battcock's *The New American Cinema* achieves a wider range of views by including some less than mediocre essays.

The catalogue and anthology approaches have their usefulness. Yet none of the above-mentioned books really gives a synthetic overview or faces deeper critical problems raised by avant-garde films. Youngblood comes close, but his veneer of hip style and indiscriminate reference to *ex cathedra* statements by a mixed bag of thinkers obscures his own valid insights. It was with relief, then, that I read Parker Tyler's *Underground Film*. With all of his drawbacks (frequent crankiness, quixotic judgments, slippery style), the former resident intellectual of the New York pre-New American Cinema scene has the good sense to try to get beyond filmmakers' and promoters' hype, to discriminate genuine from spurious innovation, and to relate the films under discussion to humanist concepts. When Tyler fails, he sounds like the John Simon of avant-garde criticism. When he succeeds you sense a person who looks at films and also at the world. And while I still can't account for, within Tyler's own framework, his appreciation of Warhol and his blindness to much of Brakhage, Tyler's well-grounded catholicity of taste and common sense make him the best thing to read about avant-garde film first.

## TWO: SITNEY'S SHORTSIGHTED VISION

“Once everything has been run through—wither is one to run then? If all potential permutation were exhausted—what would follow? ... In any case, going round in a circle would be more probable than standing still.”

- Nietzsche

Against the relative poverty of book-length criticism of avant-garde film, I can easily understand why P. Adams Sitney's *The Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* was, as they say, “long-awaited” and hailed before publication. Essentially Sitney has written a serious, long, and somewhat academic study of what he perceives as the major line of development of the North American avant-garde from Maya Deren to

Michael Snow. This sort of book fills the bulk of university press publication in the humanities. The author takes a subject and period, traces out its development with a close “reading” of the selected “texts.” By the standards of art history or literary criticism, the book is definitely second rate. In the intellectually barren area of film studies, it is, by virtue of the competition, one of the more impressive recent English language film books.

Since selection and emphasis is crucial when the critic moves beyond compiling a catalogue, a list of Sitney’s chosen filmmakers itself tells a lot about his orientation: Maya Deren, Sidney Peterson, James Broughton, Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, Stan Brakhage, Bruce Baillie, Harry Smith, Jordan Belson, Robert Breer, Peter Kubelka, Christopher MacLaine, Bruce Connor, Ron Rice, Robert Nelson, Ken Jacobs, Michael Snow, Paul Sharits, and Hollis Frampton. Someone familiar with experimental film would immediately note the omissions: Ed Emschwiler, Stan Vanderbeek, Storm De Hirsh, the Kuchar brothers, Andy Warhol, Joyce Wieland, and many more. Sitney defends his mission of major figures in order to “isolate and derive the visionary strain within the complex manifold of the American avant-garde film.” He doesn’t claim to be exhaustive in his inductive-deductive process of analysis.

However, his selection predetermines his results and his prejudices predetermine his selection. I don’t mean this as a carping criticism: it’s always present as a critical dilemma. The question is not what Sitney selects, but the basis on which he selects. He explicitly states his bias in his preface: the filmmaker’s commitment to “the major theoretical concerns” of the American avant-garde. Thereby he favors those who either wrote about their films, or who were frequently interviewed—that is, those who had access to the organs of publicity and/or felt their films didn’t stand alone. These “major theoretical concerns, according to Sidney, are those which

“coincide with those of our post-Romantic poets and Abstract impressionist painters. Behind them lies a potent tradition of Romantic poetics.”

It’s certainly a plausible approach, and Sitney can encapsulate about thirty years of experimental films into the rough progression of Anglo-American poetry from Wordsworth and Coleridge to Wallace Stevens and Charles Olson. What he *can’t* explain is why that progression rather than another defines avant-garde film, or how that progression relates to anything outside of a series of formal choices. Sitney’s problem begins with taking his understanding of “the tradition of Romantic poetics” over wholesale from literary critic Harold Bloom (*The Visionary Company*, *Yeats*, etc.) who is hardly the last word in literary criticism. The internal and formalist approach of Bloom hinders Sitney in

constructing what he calls his “historical morphology” of the avant-garde North American film. History disappears.

In fact Sitney ends up with what could be called the internal art history approach to the avant-garde. He has an overriding concern with the internal development of form, and his method rests on a partial truth. To a certain extent the avant-garde evolves along the historical axis of film convention. That is, films generate films; films refer back to films. To this extent the approach is valid. However, the historian-critic him/herself affects film, both our understanding of it and future film production, by elevating some films and denigrating others.

Criticism enters into the historical process and limits not only the future, but also our understanding of the past and future. Further, by using this internal historical approach, Sitney tends to look for connections where there are parallels, lineage where there is sequential similarity, and sources where there are simple antecedents. Thus the critic creates a pattern and imposes a succession that is more important than the contradictions, backsliding, and uneven development that make up the reality of avant-garde film history. The effect is to re-order, to re-impose, in fact to deny the very individuality—the singular notion of creative genius—at the heart of Romantic aesthetics.

We can look at Sitney’s method at work in his chapter on Kenneth Anger, “The Magus”:

“Formally. SCORPIO RISING’s precursor (by a few years at most) was Bruce Connor’s second film, COSMIC RAY. Whether or not Anger has seen the film is hardly relevant here, as I can hardly believe it had a direct influence upon him. Nevertheless, Connor should be credited as the first film maker to employ ironically a popular song as the structural unit in a collage film ... The structure of the ideas evoked by Connor’s collage is straightforward; unlike Anger’s film, there is no room for ambiguity in COSMIC RAY.”

Sitney is too sophisticated to try to find a direct influence here, but COSMIC RAY still comes off as a “precursor.” Its importance does not lie in itself as an aesthetic object but in its role as a “first” in the “historical morphology.” More significantly, note the creeping assumption at the end of the paragraph. There’s a seemingly natural or automatic development from “straightforward” to “ambiguity.” While Sitney doesn’t explicitly place a value on this change, he mentions it—and similar changes—again and again. After 435 pages, a vast field has been arranged in a linear and basically ascending way from Deren to Snow, Sharits, and Frampton (even in the last chapter, you sense that Sharits is “further along” than Snow, and Frampton, more “avant” than Sharits).

As questionable as this ascending spire of form is, worse yet, Sitney becomes the victim of his own scheme when he cannot explain what he describes:

“In the sequence of Anger’s films, there is an evolution of forms from the late forties through the sixties which will recur again and again in the works of his contemporaries. The shift is from the trance film to the mythopoeic film. Both forms assert the primacy of the imagination; the first through dream, the second through ritual and myth.”

The most sympathetic reader is stumped at this point, for Sitney cannot explain *why* this happened. Did the trance film expend and exhaust itself? Is myth and ritual a higher level of understanding than dream? Was there an intellectual shift from Freudian psychology to Jungian? We don't know, and Sitney never tells us, but just moves on to recording core changes, although sometimes he has to note discrepancies in his modal of development:

“The cases of Peterson and Broughton are exceptional; they do not fit the pattern neatly, but that is because the former stopped making films in 1949 and the latter left the medium for so long before returning to it.”

Is that really an adequate explanation? If Broughton and Peterson had continued to make films without interruption, would their films really have then fallen into Sidney’s rather neo-platonic pattern of history? And on a more human level, how would Peterson and Broughton feel about not fitting on Sitney’s Procrustean bed?

Sitney’s exclusive concentration on the internal formal changes in the avant-garde leads him to take too much at face value or less: most notably the self-statements of avant-gardists. For example, he quotes Anger’s Alister Crowleyesque statements and then seems unable to know what to do with them: neither accepting them as true nor rejecting them as absurd, when the statements themselves force either an embrace or rejection on the reader’s part. Whatever a critic thinks of Anger’s films as objects, if he or she is going to quote Anger’s intentions, he or she is then obligated to accept them, dismiss them, or find some rationalization for them, such as their being “metaphoric.” Sitney simply reports them and with classic liberalism insults both Anger and the reader. More inexcusably, Sitney reports Brakhage’s remarks on his film *SIRIUS REMEMBERED* where the filmmaker expresses his frustration with friends who were blind to the decaying body of the filmmaker’s dead dog, Sirius, and also uncomprehending of his film about death, *SIRIUS REMEMBERED*, using the image of the animal’s corpse. Sitney, in effect, joins the friends by treating the film as a formal exercise and repressing the meditation on death at the heart of the film.

The purely internal approach also gives Sitney problems in other areas. When discussing Deren, he never mentions one of the biggest problems most audiences have with her films: the residing realism of the way we all interpret cinematography. For all of her talent, Deran's cinematography is horribly "realistic" given her aims. We tend to interpret Deren's use of 16mm, black and white stock with conventional lenses and relatively conventional lighting as "realistic," especially when we can read the style codes of costume and hairstyle as belonging to a very specific time. These visual conventions are so strong that they often cannot be overcome by Deran's experiments in editing, camera movement, and printing. Thus for all its other virtues, *RITUAL IN TRANSFIGURED TIME*, from one point of view, is simply silly and altogether too earnest for its visuals. Passages of it come off as Isadora Duncan transferred to film—a miserably wrong medium for that kind of dance. Kenneth Anger presents the same aesthetic problem: his limited resources and limited ability with camera, lighting and costuming genuinely inhibit his ability to get his conceptions into a form that audiences who are neither slavish cultists nor intimidated viewers can accept. (My own suspicion, that inept camera and mise en scene form Anger's finally inexcusable flaw, was confirmed when I saw Susan Pitt Kraning's *JEFFERSON CIRCUS SONGS*, which succeeds through skill exactly where Anger fails.)

The saving grace of Sidney's book—his long and detailed description of the films—will make it well worth the price if it comes out in paperback. But as Sitney's formal parade of films marches on page after page, the limits of his method become more and more apparent. He doesn't see the possibility that the changes he notes in "visionary film" may themselves stem from the inadequacy of Romantic aesthetics, and that the exploration and moving on to something else by his chosen filmmakers, which he uses to structure his "historical morphology," may stem from the inability of the "visionary" mode to transcend the aesthetic problems it explores. There is a possibility that from Deren to Frampton these filmmakers are not making any progress but only wandering in circles in the desert of visionary Romanticism.

I find the most curious lack in all of Sitney's books his complete refusal to ever evaluate anything he describes. We never learn if he thinks one film is better than another (except that some fit his scheme better than others), or even if he finds a film good. This unconscious parody of scientific objectivity leaves the reader to wonder, or to grasp at comparisons. For example, on Brakhage's *DOG STAR MAN*:

"The resolution of the film is not a Blakean liberation into Eden and reunion of the imaginative and physical division. Brakhage at this point follows the post-Romantic substitution of tautology for liberation. In their major poems, "Un Coup de Des" and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,"



Mallarmé and Stevens triumphantly proclaim the failure of the divine within or without man; instead they posit a teleology of poetry, and in their wake Brakhage ends his film with a naked affirmation of his materials and his mechanics.”

It's true. I can accept that Brakhage is doing in film what Mallarmé and Stevens were doing in poetry. But does Sitney mean us to understand that Brakhage is the artistic peer of Mallarmé and Stevens? But Sitney will neither come out with that claim, nor clarify and qualify by giving us an evaluation of DOG STAR MAN. One grasps for the unabashed prejudices of far less serious and thoughtful critics. Why does Sitney in this book avoid coming to value judgments, especially when his earlier criticism used then? One can only speculate, so I will. The purely internal and purely formal consideration of the avant-garde, if it moves beyond description and analysis to judgment, must find formal sophistication inherently good, and the solving of formal problems a positive accomplishment in all cases. Behind this notion lies one side of Romantic aesthetics: the artist as individual creator. (The other side, fallen into oblivion since Victor Hugo on the Continent, is artist as public oracle ... though the United States, always late, has Whitman, and amiable eccentrics like Ginsberg who still believe it.)

Critic Peter Sainsbury has pointed out in *Afterimage* 2 that with the notion of the artist as individual creator, film is conceived as “a self-sufficient, existential act and ... self-expression is in itself a value fit to combat a standardized and industrialized society and its cinema.” Sainsbury goes on to give an explanation of the avant-garde trend that Sitney's book describes without explaining:

“While the function of art is reversed in the age of mechanical reproduction, from a basis in ritual to a basis in politics, the reactionary nature of the avant-garde dictates that its central concern must be with the relation of perception and phenomena and not with that of theory and essence. So as it matures, in its own terms, it becomes increasingly concerned with questions of formal structure.”

“The critical rhetoric of Sitney, Mekes, Renan and others follows fast behind this tendency. The merit of Brakhage is to have ‘achieved’ the lyric sound film; of Snow to have explored a single unit of film vocabulary; of Jacobs to have remade an old film (perceived by the Artist to be a work of Genius) in a modern spirit. Every aesthetic problem is resolved within aesthetic categories, and sensory perception is raised to the level of cognition. Hence the contention that vision is fundamentally eyesight. In this framework the significance of every art work is lost or disguised in concepts such as ‘creativity,’ ‘genius,’ ‘eternal value’ and ‘mystery’

which would, in Benjamin's words, 'facilitate the processing of data in the fascist sense.' For in the last analysis this criticism would have more to do with the aesthetics of politics than with the politics of art. And in the advent of a polarization of politics, where would the avant-garde filmmakers stand?"

The formalist art history method Sitney uses has a certain usefulness in arranging and rediscovering works from the past that were overlooked or underrated in their own time. But this method frequently has a pernicious effect in the present and immediate future. The films which established critics of the avant-garde deems important get screened and the others do not. It is the vicious trap well described by art critic Harold Rosenberg in which formal innovation becomes the principal and often the only criterion for new art, and novelty is taken as sufficient by critic and maker:

"Having a place in art history is *the* value; through attaining this place, the work's own qualities become part of the standards by which the work is judged. ... Splitting form from substance, this approach has prevailed largely through its usefulness in providing a coherent account of the development of modern art out of the art of the past. The effect has been to normalize the new and thus reduce antagonism to it."

The film critic becomes an art historian educating readers to be amateur art historians of cinema, appreciating avant-garde films as contributions to the evolution of forms, and reducing filmmaking creativity to caking the next film in the linear development of forms. No detours, please. In pursuit of an "historical morphology," history is lost.

## THINKING ABOUT THE AVANT-GARDE

Typically, discussions of avant-garde films are historically and socially shortsighted. They may track backwards in film history and move laterally into current society, but they seldom go any further. Because criticism of the avant-garde film has so limited a perspective, we should try to see the subject in the larger context of the avant-garde as a general artistic phenomenon in modern times. As a critic, I face a problem in attempting this. Because the term "avant-garde" is relative, everyone may not agree even about what is being discussed. The solution, obviously, requires a very careful historical study. While that is much needed, here I will offer some generalizations which neglect the exceptions and the fabric of history in order to gain a tentative historical perspective on the filmic avant-garde. I intend what follows as an external macroanalysis to counter the typical internal microanalysis of criticize of avant-garde films.

## ONE: FROM REVOLUTION TO REACTION

“[With the introduction of mechanical reproduction] art reacted with the doctrine of art for art’s sake, that is with a theology of art. This gave rise to what might be called a negative theology in the form of the idea of pure art, which not only denied any social function of art, but also any categorizing by subject matter.”—Walter Benjamin,

“We know very well that pure art and empty art are the main thing and that aesthetic purism was a brilliant maneuver of the bourgeois of the last century who preferred to see themselves denounced as philistines rather than as exploiters.”—Jean-Paul Sartre

The avant-garde hasn't always been with us; in fact it didn't exist as a concept or as a fact until the latter 19th century. The existence of the avant-garde as a phenomenon has historical preconditions: the rise and triumph of capitalism as an economic system, the bourgeoisie as a class, industrialization as a mode of production, urbanization as a social ordering, liberal democracy as a means of governance, and Romanticism as the dominant art movement. As these changes took place in the West during the 18th and 19th centuries, the nature and function of art in society changed.

Before Romanticism, art belonged to a special elite of the educated and intelligent members of the ruling order, and not to the people at large, except for public arts such as architecture and folk art. The Romantic movement and the avant-garde movements that followed in its wake revolted against traditionally received and sanctioned high culture, represented most clearly by the academies. European Romanticism flowered simultaneously with the creation of modern mass culture. For the first time art was popularized and commercialized, becoming an integral part of market production.

The result—mass culture—distinguishes itself primarily by its commodity nature. The production and distribution of art becomes economically profitable. The art public is no longer the elite of the cultivated—the audience for classical humanism—but a public market: everyone with a penny for a broadsheet, a dime for a novel, a shilling for a show. Coming later, the avant-garde inherits Romanticism’s opposition to classical humanism and adds its own opposition to modern mass culture. Thus the avant-garde, poised against classics and commercials, is isolated from all social strata but a segment of the intelligentsia and a few patrons who provide an irregular and unreliable audience.

As a result, the avant-garde exists only in a negative and somewhat hopeless relation to the general society, and its stance of *épater la*

*bourgeoisie* is hardly a positive program for artistic reform. To define itself against the dominant bourgeois culture, the avant-garde has to acknowledge the bourgeoisie as a public, or as part of a public. It cannot negate that public out of existence. Similarly, it can and must be anti-traditional, but it tends to form its conventions in directly inverse relation to traditional conventions. Additionally, in reaction against what it perceives as the escapism and vulgarization of mass art, it raises the unique and individual art work as a paramount value and carries individuality to its logical end. At the same time, without noticing the contradiction, it tends to assume that the public can be brought around, can be transformed by viewing avant-garde art, which negates the purely aesthetic end that it claims. Its ethos of individualism tends to a kind of bourgeois revolutionary response to the dilemmas it feels.

Within the context of this situation, the avant-garde serves as an opposition culture, a negating art. The very conditions of modern society create the conditions which allow for the emergence of an avant-garde. It comes into being and exists as the negation of a general and dominant culture by a specific one. But in the last case, the avant-garde cannot negate art nor society but only continue in an exacerbated relation to art and society until society itself changes. How does this opposition take shape? Since the most basic characteristic of art in bourgeois society is its commodity nature—that it is marketed—the avant-garde almost always, and almost by definition, strives to overcome this primary quality by creating a product free from the taint of the marketplace. But such a withdrawal is finally impossible. (The inverse strategy—such as Pop Art’s capturing the market—negates the advanced quality of the avant-garde.) So, because we live in a bourgeois epoch, the avant-garde exists as a negating art, yet it characteristically exhibits a deep unwillingness to face the realities of modern commercial life.

The avant-garde depends for its existence on an ideology of individualism. The avant-garde attempts to negate the social values of art and change the art experience into something private. All epochs prior to the bourgeois epoch essentially understood art as a social fact, even when its society was a tiny elite, and if it was made by an individual. Only in the bourgeois period do we assume that the function and meaning of art is private, unique, and individual. Though the European Romantic movement expressed the ideology of bourgeois individualism, the Romantics spoke as public individuals, addressing society in general. The avant-garde has chosen the voice of a private individualism, speaking to a coterie. The difference is profound.

After (and sometimes during) the Romantic movement the artist was not sure of his/her public. Originally Romanticism served as the cultural arm of the bourgeoisie’s rise to power; once risen, the bourgeoisie institutionalized that original thrust of Romanticism. What was once revolutionary (that is, bourgeois revolutionary) became part of the

status quo. With opposition culture becoming dominant, the forward historical movement or “advance” of culture then became the business of vanguardism: a thrusting into the future by a small alike group that denied any gradual evolution or spontaneous advance of art. The first impulse for the avant-garde came from an almost subliminal understanding of bourgeois cultural hegemony. So, the avant-garde is an opposition movement, by nature, but not necessarily revolutionary.

The avant-garde sees itself as a wedge into the future, and frequently falls back on (implicitly) the model of French Impressionism in painting: the belief that the public eventually accepts what is avant-garde at one time, the new movement gradually winning and triumphing. But this is an unreliable model, for many more avant-gardes fail than win public acceptance. In particular, no film avant-garde has won public acceptance, though some have won a place in film history.

Avant-gardes in all the arts have several consistent characteristics. Avant-garde art is anti-mass, anti-public, anti-commercial, anti-tradition (except for its own tradition of innovation), anti-bourgeois. In this it faces a constant dilemma of marginality. As part of its negative self-definition, it tends to assume that the inverse is better, but it is left only sarcastic and undefined attacks on establishment art. Perpetually caught in the newness/ fashion syndrome, the avant-garde seeks to impose a new norm, but once that norm is accepted—even within its prescribed audience—it abandons the standard. Within the commercial system, fashion tends to function in a field of stylistic pluralism to standardize taste and to stimulate an artificial (and profitable) change, the artistic equivalent of planned obsolescence. The avant-garde does not so much fight within the field of stylistic pluralism to win but chooses stylistic dissent as sufficient. Since the avant-garde’s natural public itself is marginal in society, the avant-garde itself is extremely attenuated in relation to society.

The situation of the avant-garde artist is similar. Living within a market system, society views the artist as a parasite and a consumer since his/her work has no clear market value. In fact the artist is a worker and a producer, but tends not to see him/herself that way or to be seen that way. The usual ideology for artists is to accept a definition as a self-employed professional in order to counter society’s definition. Thus within art schools, the painters are ranked at the top—and the graphic designers at the bottom, in direct reversal of the use value which normally governs social ordering under capitalism.

Finally, among the characteristics of the avant-garde we can see its inability to overcome the basic social and political problems it faces—most obviously the state and institutional pressures of censorship and economics. In a usual avant-garde response, the artist turns his/her

inability to confront these problems into a false virtue or considerable self-pity. Thus the avant-garde periodically complains about censorship (e.g. Jack Smith's *FLAMING CREATURES* in the early 60s) by a state representing a public the avant-garde has scorned. And it continuously complains about not receiving state patronage or institutional patronage.

Avant-garde artists' attempts to resolve these problems are typically ineffectual. On the one hand they attempt freedom from the marketplace by withdrawal which then condemns them to irrelevance ... the freedom of ineffectuality. They cannot really attempt success—that is, capturing the marketplace—and have done so only under peculiar market conditions, such as Pop Art, or the Warhol phenomenon in film. At the same time they can exist commercially only by producing art which is merchandise, and they tend to live on the hope of a future market, a future merchant, a future audience. Caught in a floating ambiguity, their art tends to extremes: a pure subjectivity that loses touch with the concrete and becomes ungeneralizable, or an abstractionism that also loses the concrete and any sense of history. The avant-garde artist is held back in all cases by his/her ethos of individualism. And it is only in some limited ways (distribution co-ops, etc.) and not in the films themselves that they have overcome their arch-individuality.

Of course reality is not as clear cut as the previous generalizations. Artists and distributors have in fact quasi-resolved some of the persistent problems of the avant-garde. The museum, the cooperative distribution outlets, and the alternate galleries, the film clubs, etc., have created a certain marginal alternative to the marketplace. In response to the dealer/ promoter situation which rests on the crassest capitalist idea that aesthetic value equals market value, an alternate system for the avant-garde minimally provides some free space. However, in the end it simply sublimates rather than challenges the commercial reality of art in our culture.

## TWO: AVANT-GARDE ART AND VANGUARD POLITICS

“In any country art is accepted as realistic so long as it accords with principles which are familiar to the people of that country. Are we right in regarding Egyptian art as formalist? It is often considered to be stylized, but the Egyptians regarded its conventions as indispensable.”—Veselov Meyerhold

“Art is one form of human relations and, for that reason, it depends on those factors which determine human relations in general.”—Bertolt Brecht

Any realistic survey of avant-garde film is bound to sound pretty

pessimistic in political terms. But a great deal of what is true about the avant-garde's position in U.S. society also pertains to militant political cinema: miniscule relative audiences, appeal to a self-confirming group which is marginal to society, highly suspect ability to effect change, etc., etc.. Which is to say the problems of radical "aesthetic" cinema and radical "political" films are not so far apart, and exploring one should give some clues to considering the other.

The artistic avant-garde did not always stand apart from the political avant-garde. Naturalism combined the two, as did early Soviet experimentalism and surrealism (though rather uneasily for both sides in the latter two cases). On the other hand, Italian futurism enthusiastically embraced fascism, and German fascism officially condemned expressionism while taking over its methods for propaganda purposes. Aside from such direct links, every avant-garde has proclaimed it would change the world by changing consciousness through art. That claim is beginning to look pretty ridiculous now. For example, in 1966 Jonas Mekas spoke for the New American Cinema when he said:

"We used to march with posters protesting this and protesting that. Today, we realize that to improve the world, the others, first we have to improve ourselves: that only through the beauty of our own selves can we beautify the others. Our work, therefore, our most important work at this stage is ourselves. Our protest and our critique of the existing order of life can be only through the expansion of our own being. We are the measure of all things. And the beauty of our creation, of our art, is proportional to the beauty of ourselves, of our souls."

Nine years later if we ask what the New American Cinema attained along these lines, it looks as having been as significant in changing the world as Guru Marharaji Ji and other spiritual hula hoops.

The pluralism that is a structural feature of liberal bourgeois society creates the situation in which exceptional art can arise. At the same time, that pluralism finally only tolerates ineffective dissent. For example, in a one-dimensional society, television rapidly co-opted formal innovation in film. I'm told some of Brakhage's films have been purchased for study by advertising agencies eager to keep TV commercials fresh. Avant-gardists don't often consider the problem of how their works can indeed break with the dominant culture and have some kind of lasting social significance.

While avant-gardists tend to be perversely naive about politics, the left has been equally opaque about the avant-garde. Since examples of left blindness to new art are rather well known, let me offer a little-known example of a leftist flexible enough to change his opinion. In 1921 Lenin

wrote a letter to Lunacharsky, Commissar for Education, denouncing the latter's decision to print 5,000 copies of Mayakovsky's avant-garde poem,"150,000,000." "It is nonsense, stupidity, double-dyed stupidity and affectation," Lenin wrote, urging no more than 1600 copies be published, and those "for libraries and cranks." He closed with the facetious suggestion that Lunacharsky "be flogged for his futurism." Later in the same year Lenin and Nadezhda Krupskaya, his wife, visited an art students' commune. Krupskaya recalled that the students slept on the bare floor and had no salt or bread. but great enthusiasm. Lenin asked them:

"What do you read? Do you read Pushkin?' 'Oh no,' said someone, 'after all he was a bourgeois; we read Mayakovsky.' Ilyich smiled. 'I think,' he said. that Pushkin is better.' After this Ilyich took a more favourable view of Mayakovsky. Whenever the poet's name was mentioned he recalled the young art students who, full of life and gladness, and ready to die for the Soviet system, were unable to find words in the contemporary language with which to express themselves, and sought the answer in the obscure verse of Mayakovsky. Later [Lenin] ... praised Mayakovsky for the verse in which he ridiculed Soviet red tape."

To the students, Mayakovsky's poems were new forms and new contents for a new consciousness, an argument Lenin was willing to accept, if not endorse.

This story has its limits for this discussion because it deals with a postrevolutionary situation, and in the U.S. present we have a prerevolutionary society. Recognizing this, from time to time the avant-garde justifies itself by claiming that its films will change consciousness, and that when enough consciousness and consciousnesses is/are changed, the revolution will take place. Art will make the revolution (though it hasn't made any so far in all of world history). And, after all, hasn't everyone had the experience of seeing some conventional film and then feeling afterwards that to some extent it changed their way of feeling and thinking? The avant-garde claims to do the same thing on a more regular basis. One reason why the avant-garde seems to change consciousness, apart from the hype of its publicists that it does so, comes from its appeal to middle class young adults—late adolescents and young professionals—who themselves are attaining maturity. Thus the disquieting strangeness in innovative films can seem to expand consciousness. The young audience finds appealing an art that induces a new state of mind in the spectator. This shock value makes the avant-garde look more important than it really is. A mere decade later the same film can look dated or have become well-assimilated.

But discussions of film changing consciousness have their limits unless



they go into the much deeper and difficult questions of problems of defining “change” and “consciousness” and how we know such change has occurred, both on the individual and social level. Both avant-gardists and leftists tend to posit absolute answers to relative and historical questions about film and social change. The avant-gardist errs by assuming art and consciousness stand independent of social relations, while the political critic ignores the complex interaction of objective and subjective conditions that make revolution a continuous process, that both precedes and follows the act of taking state power.

With that said, there are several sympathetic approaches to avant-garde film from a left political perspective. The most common left defense of the avant-garde admits its inherent political limit: that the avant-garde appeals only to a small number of people who occupy a privileged, if marginal, position in society. The argument then goes on to find worth in those avant-garde productions which clearly critique the dominant culture, arguing that such an attack, even though limited, points towards a necessary social revolution. Thus the novels of Franz Kafka, according to left critics as divergent as Lucien Goldmann and Bertolt Brecht, show alienation in class society so profoundly that they implicitly indicate the need to radically transform that society. This view, while separating itself from the demand for verisimilitude, continues one of the key ideas of mainstream Marxist aesthetics (Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Lukács). This concept is that before the revolutionary transformation of bourgeois society into proletarian society, progressive art negates the given conditions of life in class society. Such art is “good” because it demonstrates the need to transform that society.

The left argument against this position falls back on the utilitarian view that art should serve the needs of the vanguard party (or, lacking an adequate left party, the “people’s struggles” or “relevance”). This position has an obvious appeal in relating art to immediate needs, even when it reduces art to a propagandistic function. It fails to recognize culture (in the broad anthropological sense, including art) as the very substance of social life that revolutionaries are trying to transform. At its worst, Socialist Realism as a concept of criticism assumes people live at their workplace, and thus women are mainly at home and children disappear, becoming non-persons. And even at its best, in practice, realism tends to sentimentalize, and therefore trivialize, the conditions it depicts.

A different sympathetic approach to avant-garde film lies in examining a relatively recent international trend of films which calls into question, largely through a radical form (and to a lesser extent a radical content), the very nature of film in our society. This trend stands in reaction to the dominant conception of film at present. With most documentary or fictional narration, the filmmaker unhesitatingly uses a kind of universal voice and uses film to speak with that voice. Narrative film uses its

formal qualities to serve an end and hides the fact it does so. It captures reality, is a window on the world, mirrors the world, or presents drama or character or whatever. But a filmmaker may use film as an object rather than an instrument in order to speak as an individual consciousness and conscience.

The two major styles of cinema—fictional narrative as most predominantly shaped and expressed by Hollywood, and also documentary—depend on narration and almost always a third-person narrative, which transforms what is seen on the screen into others, into objects, and which creates a kind of instant credibility. Accuracy, clarity, realism—these are not general and necessary qualities of cinema, but express the ideal of a certain kind of discourse, basically a persuading discourse. But one can reject the idea of being party to such a discourse, and use film itself as objective rather than instrumental. Then one can seize images in order to destroy their closed nature, to attack their function as discourse, to break apart the very idea of images establishing relations. All cinema utilizes a body of prescriptions and habits—in short, conventions—common to all the filmmakers of a period, avant-garde or not. A film about Film, as opposed to a film about that Something Else we call reality, reflects on the social usage of film form. Such a film exposes and comments on conventions. It attacks Taken-For-Granted Form, which rests on taken-for-granted conventions, which rest on taken-for-granted assumptions about art and society. Film can act as meta-film, a meta-commentary on film and on its function past and present. Such a film establishes a new kind of discourse, an exploratory discourse, perhaps even a dialectical discourse. In short, its end is epistemological.

The “open” film, the self-reflective and self-critical film, the film which forces a distanced, intellectual, rather than empathetic, emotional response—basically, I think we don't know enough about such films to say one way or the other if they can accomplish what they promise. Such films do increasingly demonstrate the limits of the cinema of identification and projection, of mystical participation, of disinterested pleasure, of sheer contemplation—in short, the narcotic cinema that by its very form and effect negates any radical content put into a film. It will take some time to see how much of this new cinema is novelty and how much is basic change. Clearly, too, form alone cannot move such epistemological cinema from its role as negating art to a positive challenge to the status quo of film and society. However such films raise the right questions, even if they do not clearly provide practical answers. (For an additional discussion of this type of film, see the articles by myself, Martin Walsh, and Julia Lesage in JUMP CUT 4.)

If we take as an assumption that one principal value of radical film is that it can (might) increase human potentials, particularly in opposition to the deadening and limiting nature of bourgeois film, then we have a

basis for evaluating specific films: do they increase or limit human potentials? With this in mind, I want to consider not a filmmaker but a French artist, Odilon Redon (1840-1916), who shows some problems facing critics of the avant-garde. Redon's career falls into two phases: an early stage dominated by dark lithographs which express explicitly mystic and Symbolist concerns, and a later stage, when he turned to color and spent the last years of his career mostly painting vases of flowers. Redon's later career is intriguing. His earlier work has been revived with the current re-evaluation of a strong non-Impressionist trend in late 19th century French art, generally called Symbolist (Gustave Moreau, Puvis de Chavannes, the Nabis group, etc.), but Redon's flower paintings remain little known. They combine a subject so simple and ordinary that it is a cliché with an understandable and avant-garde form. Redon accomplishes what might seem impossible: works which would be easily understood and appreciated by a mass public (you could sell reproductions in Woolworth's) and which offer formal pleasures for the highly sophisticated viewer.

The question I'd like to pose is this: are these paintings progressive or reactionary? In terms of the left utilitarian perspective, these paintings of flowers certainly do not serve the immediate or general needs of revolutionary forces. But since the left utilitarian view has been most vocally argued lately in the U.S. by various Maoist sects and individuals, I would contrast their position with Chinese practice. Specifically, from a utilitarian perspective, how does one account for Mao Tse-Tung's lyrical nature poems, or the official Chinese high regard for jade carving, a tradition deeply imbedded in the elite culture of pre-Revolutionary China? I raise these questions not as putdowns, but to point out that the utilitarian position in isolation cannot deal with many questions of art, or really decide if Redon's paintings are progressive or reactionary.

The example of Redon also poses problems for the mainstream Marxist aesthetic principle of realism. When combined with utilitarianism, as in Socialist Realism, the realist doctrine seems to answer the question: though realistic or representational, Redon's flowers do not have a social context or message. But how, within a realist perspective alone, do we account for the Soviet Union's museums filled with Russian Orthodox icons?

The answer to my initial question about the progressive or reactionary nature of Redon's flower paintings is one that points out the fallacy in asking the question in that way. It can't be answered in the abstract and outside of history. Such questions are important but must always be qualified in terms of progressive or reactionary for what audience and in what historical moment. The utilitarian argument contains a partial truth and must be rephrased. We must ask what the needs of the movement are in a more comprehensive way. We must ask in a way that recognizes art as having the potential to expand human possibilities and

sees that expansion itself as progressive.

Let us return to the possibilities of a radical avant-garde film at present. Beyond the avant-garde as critique of class society or as critique of bourgeois film forms, there is another little explored and tentative possibility at this point in film history. If we accept one of cinema's functions as leisure recreation, entertainment and amusement, then an avant-garde cinema could fulfill this function in a socially and politically progressive way without being just a negating art. For example, the nonrepresentational films of Jordan Belson and others serve as perceptual fields for the audience. Given what has happened in all the arts in the 20th century and given what we now know of the human mind, the only acceptable definition of art must start with, or come close to, Morse Peckham's idea that

“a work of art is any perceptual field which an individual uses as an occasion for performing the role of art perceiver.”

Filmic art has something to do with projected image, but that's about as far as we should go in forming a strict definition of film. Used to the 19th century version of mimetic representation, still dominant in this 20th century art, many people have difficulty in appreciating nonrepresentational film. A genuine film aesthetic must face the problem of nonrepresentational art that deliberately rejects imitation of any reality. There is, and has been, after all, instrumental music, decorative art, design, etc. Nonrepresentational art isn't new, just neglected.

While socialists have often recognized the importance and promoted the practice of nonrepresentational arts, especially in artisan work (for example, William Morris in late Victorian England), Marxism has generally not handled the subject even with minimal grace. Although Marx developed a thorough analysis of society in general, he never detailed his concepts in terms of art but more or less took over the educated German middle class aesthetic assumptions of his day. In turn Marxists have tended to fall back on utilitarian concepts or new justifications for mimesis, calling it realism, or have combined the two into Socialist Realism, or tried to place art outside of current society and ideology. We face an uncomfortable choice between this kind of Marxist aesthetic and formalist aesthetics: content for its own sake, or form for its own sake.

That is a false choice. Many of the apparent paradoxes and dilemmas of modern art disappear if we conceive of art in its social context, in its historical moment and movement, in its specific context with relation to an audience. An adequate radical film criticism must rest on this understanding. Further, it must recognize the human dimension of film art. The debates over subject matter and treatment, be they phrased in terms of realism, anti-realism, non-representation, or whatever, are

sterile without a full understanding of the human creation and use of art. This understanding implies a dialectical conception of human history. With that, film criticism can be worthy of the films it criticizes.

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